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The Explicit, Implicit, and Unknown: Comprehensive Exams

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KEYWORDS: Comprehensive Exams, Advisers, Implicit or Explicit Biases.

Introduction

This chapter addresses the explicit, implicit, and unknown obstacles that PhD and master's students will encounter in preparing for their comprehensive exams. Comprehensive exams can either be oral or written. They are supposed to check “knowledge” like a traditional exam but are also supposed to ensure students are properly socialized—that they can write and talk about literature in political science as a colleague would. Some comprehensive exams cover a broad subfield, while others cover more narrow areas of expertise. Both authors of this chapter completed comprehensive exams or “comps” as a part of a doctoral program. Thus, the advice within this chapter is written with such students in mind. The suggestions within this chapter may or may not apply to you. Each graduate program is different with varying dynamics. Therefore, what is helpful to a student in one department may not be useful for a student in another. Some programs may have a more difficult environment than others or may have easier expectations. While the guidance within this chapter provides a good starting point, we recommend speaking to graduate students in your own program. Students who have taken and passed their own comprehensive exams may provide more tailored advice.

Practical Thematic Space

This section of the chapter will address some of the unexpected issues that arise in studying for the comprehensive exam from a practical thematic premise. These include planning study schedules, meeting with graders, fear and nerves, mental and physical health, and study groups.

Study Schedule

When you embark on your comprehensive exams journey, plan a study schedule. Remember that you have been studying for these exams the entire length of your program. You are not beginning this preparation in a vacuum. You have many semesters of classes under your belt. You have studied and learned in each of these courses. Keeping this in mind, beginning your road to comps with a planned schedule and strategy is wise. When creating your study schedule, think about the fields you will be taking your comprehensive exams or “comping” in. Which one will require more study time? Which one needs more practice exams? Within your department, most fields will have a reputation. Whether they have an

easy reputation or hard varies by university. The more intimidating fields will most likely call for more practice exams and meetings with graders. The fields with more confusing theory will need longer study sessions to parse through the reading material. To determine the reputation of each field, do not be afraid to ask the students who have taken and passed their own comps.

Setting a start date for your study schedule is an important decision. Most exams occur in the spring semester of the third year. For us, the exams were in the middle of the sixth semester in the program. Beginning a study routine at the start of the fifth semester worked well. For others whose exams are at the beginning of the sixth semester, starting the summer after the second year may be better. As a rule, beginning your comps studying six months before the exam is a smart decision. Giving oneself a lengthy period of time to study each field also gives one the opportunity to apply spaced repetition learning (Cepeda et al. 2006) or other learning methods. Starting too early can be as bad as starting late. This lengthens the amount of time your body spends under stress. Additionally, starting early makes it more likely for your brain to forget the subjects you studied in the beginning. Around half a year should be long enough to tackle all the needed sections of each field without adding extra strain. Due to the many expectations and challenges during the exam process, if you have caregiving responsibilities or work in addition to attending graduate school, make sure to make alternative arrangements or take time off as needed (chapter 16 may provide helpful suggestions for how to balance caregiving and studying).

When planning your schedule, consider which fields you have preferred and which you find to be more arduous. Study those that you do well in and those that you dislike or find more difficult. This will help keep your mind from tiring out. Similarly, it is helpful to spend around one month at a time on a specific comprehensive exam field. This strategy helps keep certain theories in one field from muddling another field's theories and paradigms. However, allowing some leeway to adapt your fixed learning schedule to your needs will give you an advantage (Mettler et al. 2016).

Meeting with Advisers and Graders

Meeting with advisers and exam graders is often a good strategy for preparing for comps. If your program is transparent about which professors will be grading the exam, it is best to meet with them at least twice before the scheduled exam. Ask questions about the literature that they themselves teach or research. Not only will this help resolve questions that form when studying, it will show faculty that you are taking the exams seriously. These meetings should exhibit effort to accumulate knowledge in their field. Besides meeting with potential graders, meet with previous professors you have taken classes with. The subjects within these courses are often fair game for the exam. If your department is not upfront or does not appoint exam graders in advance, it is best to meet at least once with each professor that may grade the exam.

When meeting with potential graders, it is helpful to inquire about their expectations for the exam in addition to substantive questions regarding their expertise. This can help shape how you answer the exam questions. Most professors prefer a structured essay with a clear argument rather than an answer that simply presents everything learned. This is helpful to know to prevent "brain dump" answers.

Fear and Anxiety

Comprehensive exams are a fear-inducing process. In fact, for us, the fear and anxiety leading up to the exams was worse than the actual exams themselves. It is normal for you to feel immense apprehension during the months before your comps. Every graduate student is nervous about the exams. Comps carry a weight that provokes not only anxiety but also insecurity. This can cause major hurdles including hesitancy to share practice exam answers or meet with professors. However, one must keep in mind the many students that had the same feelings yet were successful. Oftentimes, we are our own worst critics. What you believe to be inadequate preparation or poor note taking is competent and satisfactory to another. If the strain becomes debilitating, consider seeking support from mental health counseling or other resources on campus, as described in chapter 69.

Study Groups

The use of study groups in supporting graduate students prepare for exams and conduct research has begun to receive increasing attention (Maher et al. 2008). In forming study groups, it is important for candidates to create groups that include participants who have good relationships with each other. They should be no more than four to five participants to reduce the likelihood of personality conflict, freeriding, and cliquing. Study group members should hold each other accountable for weekly contributions to the study group. This expectation can be accomplished by assigning chapters and/or writing summaries to individual group members that are due on a weekly basis for presentation to all group members. Freeriding should be discouraged and nipped in the bud either by a first warning or removal from the study group for repeated violations. Freeriding is disempowering, creates conflict in the group, and negates focus on the ultimate goal of preparing the group to meet the challenges of the test.

Mental and Physical Health

Part of mental and physical health is having a good routine to pace yourself. According to Birch (2011), there is a global increase in mental health disorders. Pacing yourself over the short few weeks before the exam is an important ingredient for success. This helps you reduce stress, more thoroughly comprehend the material, and avoid last minute panic memorization that may lead to failure. Pacing yourself not only helps manage the volume of reading and writing the candidate needs to do but allows candidates to scaffold their work building up to the ultimate success of passing the comprehensive exam while keeping sane in the process.

In terms of practical activities associated with mental and physical health, be available to do leisure activities and hobbies you enjoy in a group or individually. Movies, down time, exercise, and meeting with friends are essential elements to reduce the stress of studying for a major exam. You cannot read and study every minute of the day. Your mind needs a break, and you also need to sustain your social network. Be available to do extracurricular things you enjoy doing. Talking to other students who have taken the comprehensive exam helps demystify the exam. It assists you to appreciate the real and nuanced human experiences students go through in preparing for the comprehensive exam. In addition to this, get enough sleep before the exam so your mind will be in top shape to respond to the tough questions on the test. Sufficient sleep seems obvious, but many students forget the place of sufficient sleep in good mental and physical health. For more in-depth tips on achieving a healthy balance in graduate school, consider consulting chapters 62-69.

Theoretical Thematic Space

This part of the chapter will highlight some of the unexpected issues that arise in studying for the comprehensive exam from a theoretical thematic space. These include note taking, faculty biases, reading lists, and practice exams.

Note Taking

Your notes will be an essential tool throughout your comprehensive exam preparation. Create a folder for each exam you will be taking, then further divide those notes by each field, theory, and paradigm. This will help organize your studying. For example, if you were to study International Relations, creating an outline on Realism would be useful. Furthermore, gather each syllabus from classes you attended in graduate school. Use each of these courses to study for your comprehensive exams. Review the syllabi and gather any notes you took during those courses. Remember, you have been preparing for your comprehensive exams since the beginning of grad school. You have been studying for them your entire graduate career. Old notes can refresh your memory of what you already know.

If you are reading this guidebook as a first or second year, begin taking thorough notes and store them in an online cloud or drive that will keep them safe. These notes will be invaluable when it is time to prepare for your exams. While handwritten notes have some advantages (Aragón-Mendizábal et al. 2016), typing your notes and storing them in an online folder will save yourself an immense amount of time later on.

Sharing notes is a common practice in some programs and is sometimes encouraged. Yet, it is frequently frowned upon. If you are fortunate enough to find yourself in a program with graduate students who readily share their notes, it is best to be discreet. Some professors may view note-sharing as a plagiaristic practice. Use notes procured from other students as a starting point only. Understand that each student will have different viewpoints, distinct arguments, and varying preferences. Your comprehensive exam answers may argue something vastly different than your colleague's exam. That is favorable. Each scholar has a different view of the world and that is where new ideas and theories are birthed. So, take your own notes even if you receive notes from others—as their notes will not be as useful to you as your own.

Faculty Biases

It is important to consider the individual opinions of faculty members and the implicit and/or explicit bias that comes with them. When working with individuals, different personalities and relationships often dictate environments within academia. Hence, interactions with faculty members are an essential component of your preparation. Keep in mind as you interact with faculty, nothing exists in a vacuum—inherent biases and perceptions can be formed without intention. Therefore, meetings with faculty members can be used to discern what they think of your ideas and arguments. For example, a conversation with a professor may lead to them divulging their viewpoint of a specific ontological debate. Knowing how each faculty member views the theories within your field will help you form your exam arguments.

Reading Lists

Acquire a range of reading lists that provide a diverse and broad coverage of political science pedagogical, methodological, and disciplinary lenses to understanding the field. According to (Giblin et al. 2008), comprehensive examination reading lists have a significant impact on scholarship. With this in mind, make the effort to apply these readings to core subfields of political science. In organizing your reading lists, make notes next to those readings that best apply to case studies, theories, and concepts you anticipate writing about during the comprehensive exam. Remember, the comprehensive exam is timed. You will need to give sufficient time to each question in order to answer it effectively and give the examiner unshakable faith that you know the content and you can expertly apply it. Develop the savvy to read the reading list and highlight contrarian arguments to the established traditional norm or classics in the field of political science. Make sure to have a good balance of readings on your list that speak to classical authors in political science from Western Europe and North America. Also be well versed on the readings of authorities in the field from the Global South to provide you with a good balance of the field of political science. Show an independent understanding of the theory and concepts nascent in the readings and their theoretical premises.

Practice Exams

Stewart-Wells (2020) emphasizes the reality that comps have become a staple in doctoral programs as a way for students to express their understanding of academic material, for faculty to assess their learning, and for students to apply that learning to their fields of study. The old adage goes “practice makes perfect.” With this in mind, practice exams are the best way for students to mimic actual exam conditions, attempt different exam taking techniques, and master skills that will make them successful in taking the final comprehensive exam.

Comprehensive exams are essential hurdles to overcome in the journey towards candidacy for doctoral students in political science. Use chapter summaries of different readings as it will be impossible to cover everything. Once you have a good understanding of the core tenets of each of the books or readings you have not been able to go through individually, attempt some practice exams. Time yourself taking the practice exam to see how much time it takes you to comprehensively complete each question.

You may want to recruit another graduate student to grade a practice exam in exchange for grading

theirs or passing on the favor for another student later. Alternatively, if you enroll in a directed readings or independent study course with a professor, they too may be willing to administer a practice exam to you. Practice exams should ideally be done after you have had a chance to go over a majority of the readings. You should be in a commanding position to ably tackle the questions on each section of the comprehensive exam. An essential element of preparing for the comprehensive exam is knowing the student cannot read and memorize everything. As a result, reading chapter summaries, understanding and applying the material through practice exams, are all critical to success on the comprehensive exam.

Conclusion

While comps can be a point of adversity and tribulation for graduate students, they also provide a moment to expand your knowledge and improve yourself as a scholar. There will be both expected challenges and unexpected issues that arise during your comp preparation. Though, when one takes the time to maintain a well-balanced lifestyle during preparation and forge connections with professors and students, preparing for comps can be a less daunting and more fulfilling experience. Much of the advice in this chapter is often learned during the comps process rather than known beforehand. We hope this guidebook chapter sheds light on the explicit, implicit, and unknowns of the comps process and provides you with more wisdom than the authors of this chapter had before their comprehensive exams.

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